

# Justice for Drywallers Strike Support

During the last month the San Diego branch has been actively involved in the Justice for Drywallers strike (see July and August SW for details) in San Diego county. We would like to outline the character of our intervention, some of our successes and difficulties, and future prospects for the branch.

In our estimation, this is a very important strike which in many ways may foreshadow further struggles by non-union, low-wage, Black, Latino, and Asian workers in the 1990s. The strike began on June 1, but we did not hear about it until a month later on July 3. An article appeared in the San Diego edition of the *L.A. Times* that said 150 "non-union, striking" workers had occupied a construction site in Orange county and were being charged with kidnapping! To say the least, this sounded different and we decided to find out what was going on.

From our initial phone calls it sounded like the strike was only in Orange County, so we drove up to the strike HQ in the city of Orange. We brought along all our copies of *Socialist Worker*, which we distributed free to the strikers (none of whom has any money) and sat down to interview Jesus Gomez, one of the strike leaders.

Gomez is considered by many to be the one who began the Justice for Drywallers movement. He told us about the issues involved in the strike, and the police harassment and racism faced by the strikers. After talking to Gomez for a considerable period of time, he told us that hundreds of drywallers were also on strike in San Diego County and we should contact Tony Hernandez.

We met Hernandez the next day and talked to him about what was happening in San Diego. It was obvious that our course of action, given the nature of the strike, the police repression and inaction by the labor movement, should be to organize a strike support committee to build broader labor, community and student support for Justice for Drywallers.

There were, however, a couple of things we had to take into consideration. The most

obvious was the size of our branch (six at the time, most of whom were working or temporarily out of town) and the fact that most of our political contacts were in student politics at UCSD, which was now in summer session.

However, since no one else was doing anything, this was an opportunity for us that we couldn't turn down. So we proposed to the San Diego drywallers that we would call a meeting under the ISO's name and asked them to speak at it with the goal of forming a strike support committee. We hoped for a modest success but had no idea how it would turn out.

We called everyone we knew who might be interested and followed up on individuals and unions who had already contacted the drywallers. One of our contacts who is active in Central America solidarity work, played an important role in organizing the first meeting. He offered the use of the Central America Information Center office and did a mailing for the meeting.

The meeting turned out to be more than a modest success. Over 25 strikers and their families showed up in a small convoy of pick-up trucks and vans, while over 20 people from various groupings attended. Joe Allen chaired the meeting and Tony Hernandez gave a presentation on the basic issues of the strike and what the strikers were facing daily from the police and the scabs. Other strikers contributed to Tony's remarks and we opened up the floor for questions, comments and discussion. The ISO proposed that we form a strike support committee that night and decide on a specific action to be organized.

All of those interested in joining the committee (about 20) stayed behind. We voted to constitute ourselves as the Justice for Drywallers Support Committee, and to build a rally on the second month anniversary of the strike on August 1. The rally was later switched to August 8 for logistical reasons.

A number of organizations and individuals made up the strike support committee besides the ISO.

The Hermandad Mexicana Nacional—a cultural rights and social organization of

Mexican immigrants—has sent a couple of people regularly to meeting. Individual unionists from the Painters and Ironworkers have attended almost all meetings. Chicano left-wing activists have also attended, along with individual contacts of the ISO and other people. The meetings have usually been bilingual. We also impressed upon the strikers the need to have representatives at all support committee meetings, and 2 or 3 of the strike leaders have attended regularly.

Soon after the second meeting of the support committee, two of our contacts who had gotten involved in supporting the strike joined the ISO.

The major point of contention that has arisen in the committee, sometimes clearly, sometimes not so clearly, has been the focus of the group's work. The ISO has argued primarily for focusing on the strike, while others have argued for focusing on police brutality and issues within the Mexican community. This dispute most clearly reflected itself in the leaflet for the rally and march. The first leaflet drawn up by a long standing Chicano activist advertised the rally as against police brutality, adding in small print that it was also to "support the striking drywallers."

While this leaflet was used for distribution in some areas, the ISO proposed another leaflet which advertised the rally firstly as a gathering in solidarity with the strike and only secondly to protest police brutality. While this was accepted by the committee as a whole, it covered up for the moment, the question of focus that still exists.

Plans were made for the widest possible distribution of leaflets across the county. On August 1, six different groups of strikers distributed 5000 leaflets at 6 of the largest swap meets (flea markets). in the region. Strikers also leafleted the border crossing at San Ysidro. NASSCO, one of the largest union employers in the region, was leafleted 4 days before the rally. Leaflets and posters for the march and rally were posted in many of the Mexican neighborhoods.

Members of the support committee and the strikers also met with Joe Francis, head of the Central Labor Council of San Diego, to elicit support for the strike and the rally. Francis agreed to speak and promised some financial and legal support for the strike. Francis is a

rather oily, right-wing character who nobody trusts.

The rally and march were pretty successful. Over 500 strikers and supporters attended. Strike leaders from the LA, Orange country and San Diego spoke. An array of speakers from different unions gave solidarity greeting and Father Victor Salandini read a message of support from farmworkers' leader Cesar Chavez. A small smattering of union staff, officers and rank-and-filers from the Painters Union, Ironworkers Union, SEIU, AFT and Teamsters were present. The march to the police station was orderly and came off without a hitch, although the police managed to route it through a relatively deserted part of the city.

The ISO did well. We were joined by comrades from Riverside and sold about 15 copies of *Socialist Worker* and about \$25 worth of lit. We had two banners in English and Spanish and several placards. Joe Allen gave solidarity greetings from the support committee. We were the only open socialist organization at the rally with a real presence. The following day we had a living-room meeting of 13 people (5 non-members) on "Can the working class change society?" given by John Charlton of the British SWP.

So far our intervention in the strike has been very important for the branch. We have initiated a strike support committee that wouldn't exist without us. The branch has 2 new members as a result of our support work, we have raised our city-wide profile in a way that we could not have imagined at the beginning of the summer and we have got to know a number of progressive activists in the labor movement.

There are various things we need to think about in our future intervention in the strike (which is likely to continue for some time), including our level of intervention, what political arguments we need to make, and whether the support committee will continue to be the best forum to have a political relationship with the strikers and with potential contacts of the ISO. However, we anticipate that our involvement will remain at a relatively high level at least until the new school year begins next month.

Joe Allen, for the San Diego Branch  
13 August 1992